

# DARK OF NIGHT

AN ANNIE PEDERSON NOVEL

COLLEEN COBLE



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*Dark of Night*

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# ONE

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## SHOULD SHE EVEN BE OUT HERE ALONE? MICHIGAN'S

U.P. was a whole lotta wilderness. Michelle Fraser's shoulder blades gave a tingle and made her glance back to see if anyone was following her. No one there. But in spite of seeing no movement in the trees and bushes, she couldn't discount her gut instinct. She'd been spooked ever since she left the safety of the women's shelter.

Maybe it was just knowing she was out here with no backup that had her on edge.

The heavy scent of rain hung in the twilight air as she set the last of her wildlife cameras in the crook of a large sugar maple tree. A northern flying squirrel chattered a warning from its nest. The *glaucomys sabrinus*'s agitation made Michelle pull away in time to avoid being nipped.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and a spooky mist blew through the forest. The sooner she was out of here, the better. Her last set of cameras hadn't turned up the elusive mountain lions she'd been searching for, but a hunter in neighboring Ontonagon County had snapped a picture of a large male reclining on a rock. If she could acquire more data, it would aid her research for the magazine article proving mountain lions inhabited the area. And she had to have pictures.

She'd been obsessed with big cats for as long as she could remember. Even the various names held a fascinating mystique: catamount, puma, cougar, mountain lion, panther.

A mosquito landed on her arm, and she swatted it. Her hands came away with a drop of blood on her fingers. Yuck. She wiped the residue on her khaki shorts and turned to go back to her ATV. A sound erupted to her right, and it sounded like either a puma or a woman's scream. The hair on her neck prickled, and she moved that way.

The scream pealed again, and she removed the lens cap on the camera slung around her neck. Her palms dampened, and her breath came fast. Walking toward danger might not be the smartest thing, but Michelle couldn't help herself. She yearned to see a puma in the wild in all its power and beauty. Her knees shook as she pulled out a bullhorn from her backpack to frighten away the cat if it sensed her as prey.

Queen pumas would be protecting their litters in June, so she needed to be careful. Her lungs labored as she rushed in that direction. Her black belt in jujitsu wouldn't do much against the speed and power of a puma. She seized a large branch to make herself seem bigger as she advanced through the forest. Evergreen needles clawed at her arms as she forced her way through a thick stand of white pine.

She paused on the other side and caught the glimmer of water. Lake Superior's waves lapped at the rocky shore, and she spotted a yellow kayak riding the swells in the shallow surf. A discarded backpack bobbed beside it.

Her sense of unease grew as she observed the scene. Glancing around, she approached the water and snagged the backpack

from the lake, then pulled the kayak onto the rocks. Her gut told her someone was in trouble.

Should she call out? If it was wildlife threatening the woman she thought she'd heard, Michelle could scare it off with a flare. But if the attacker was human, she didn't want to give away her presence and put the woman in greater danger. She scanned the area for bear or cougar spore but found nothing.

The sound of oars slapping the water came from her left, and she ducked back into the shadow of the pines until she could tell the intent of the boaters. Two figures partially shrouded in mist paddled a large canoe around a rocky finger of the shore. The glimpse of broad shoulders through the fog indicated they were probably men. She strained to listen through the sound of the wind and water but couldn't hear much.

She couldn't put her finger on why she didn't want them to see her. Maybe because they were men, and Brandon might have sent them after her.

"I know she ran this way. Trying to get to her kayak, eh." The man's heavy Yooper accent carried well over the water.

"Can't see her through this mist," the other man said. "I don't know why I let you talk me into this. Your love life isn't my business."

"You owe me. Let's try on down the shore. There's a deer trail toward the road she might have tried to take."

Their voices faded as their canoe moved past. She didn't get a good look at their faces. Was a woman out there trying to escape an abusive ex? Michelle had seen plenty of that kind of trauma this past year and experienced it personally.

Once they were out of sight, she stepped back into the clearing. "Hello," she called softly. "Is anyone here? I can help you."

She walked across the green mossy clearing, searching for a sign of an injured woman. The bushes to her left shivered and rustled, and she stepped closer. “Hello? Do you need help?”

The leaves parted as the mist swirled along the ground, and the pale oval of a woman’s face emerged. Long blonde hair hung in strings along her cheeks, and her eyelids fluttered as though she might faint. Michelle rushed forward and helped the young woman to her feet. She was in her early twenties with a slight build. Mud smeared her khaki shorts and red top, and she was barefoot.

She seemed familiar, and Michelle reached down to touch her forehead. She nearly recoiled at the heat radiating from the young woman. “Wait, aren’t you Grace Mitchell?”

They’d met when Grace first arrived at the shelter, but Michelle hadn’t immediately recognized her with the mud and dirt on her face and hair. The woman’s fever alarmed Michelle. “You’re burning up. We need to get you to a doctor.”

“I-I’ll be fine. Do you have some way out of here?”

“My ATV is this way.” Michelle put her right arm around the woman’s waist and helped her stumble toward the trail. “What are you doing out here?”

Grace paused and wiped the beads of perspiration from her forehead. “I spotted my ex driving past the shelter, and I knew he’d found me. That day we met, you mentioned a remote area you liked with a great camping spot, and I decided to try to find it. You know, hide out until I figured out where to go to get away from Roy. But I stopped by to get camping gear from my parents, and he must have followed me here. He’s out there somewhere. He and a buddy.” Her blue eyes flashed with fear. “I can’t let him find me.”

They reached the ATV, and Michelle got Grace situated, but it was a tight squeeze on the vehicle meant for one person. Michelle got water out of her backpack and helped Grace drink some. She grabbed her phone too and took a quick photo of the traumatized girl before she dropped it back into the pack.

Michelle started the machine and pulled out onto the trail back to the cabin where she'd been hiding out. She should have gotten out of here earlier since the weather had caused darkness to fall sooner than expected. It would be slow going on the rough trail with only the headlamps pushing the darkness back a short distance.

After only a few minutes, Michelle realized she'd gotten off the trail. She stopped the machine and looked around. Which way should she go? She consulted her compass and decided to push due west. They'd only gone a few feet when the ground gave out under the machine, and they went flying into the air. When Michelle hit the ground, something in her right leg snapped, and the excruciating pain was instantaneous.

She bit back a scream but couldn't stop the moan as she pulled her knee to her chest. The swelling was already starting four inches above her ankle, but at least it didn't appear to be a compound fracture. "I-I've broken my leg. Are you all right, Grace?"

When Grace didn't answer, Michelle felt along the ground until she touched her thigh. "Grace?" She felt up the young woman's body to her face.

Grace wasn't breathing. "Oh no," Michelle whispered. She checked her out in the dark as best as she could. No pulse.

Michelle dragged herself to the machine but it was on its side, and she couldn't right it with her broken leg. No one would

be searching for her out here either, and she had to find shelter. But how?

The pain made it hard to think. She froze at the sound of movement in the vegetation. Something big was crashing toward her. A deer? A mountain lion or bear?

A man's shoulders moved into sight, and his expression sent shivers up her spine. When he reached down to lift her up, the pain intensified in her leg, and her vision went black.

Law enforcement ranger Annie Pederson sat at a table by herself in the small interrogation room at the Rock Harbor jail and waited for Taylor Moore to be brought in for questioning. Maybe it was Annie's imagination, but it seemed as if the beige paint on the walls reeked with the guilt and despair of countless years of interrogations. Even the clean scent of the disinfectant used in the area didn't dissipate the unpleasantness. She didn't like this space and wished she could have talked to Taylor at the coffee shop or somewhere more pleasant.

But this meeting might be the end of her lifelong search, so she would have faced tigers right now instead of this place.

The door opened and Taylor entered. Several weeks ago Annie had hired her to help out around the Tremolo Marina and Cabin Resort and with Annie's eight-year-old daughter, but the woman had been picked up to find out what she knew about the necklace found belonging to a murdered girl. Her claim to be Annie's sister, Sarah—kidnapped from Tremolo Island twenty-four years ago—had turned Annie's every thought on its head.



According to Taylor's ID, she was twenty-nine, three years younger than Annie, so that detail matched Sarah.

Annie's heart squeezed at Taylor's ducked head and stringy locks. The bright-red hair dye was fading, and glints of her natural blonde color showed through. Her jeans and tee looked like she'd slept in them for days, and the scent of stale perspiration wafted from her.

Taylor glanced up, and Annie bit back a gasp at the defiance gleaming in those vivid blue eyes that matched Annie's eye color instead of the muddy brown Annie was used to. Jon Dunstan had claimed Taylor was wearing contacts to change her eye color, and it seemed he was right.

Annie had prided herself on her ability to read people in her line of work. She'd always thought she could detect a liar with no problem. Taylor had completely snowed her. And she'd trusted the woman with her child.

Sheriff Mason Kaleva ambled in behind Taylor. He gestured to the chair across the table from Annie. "Have a seat, Ms. Moore."

In his forties, his husky form brought solace to Annie. He'd always been there for her and his town, and his kind brown eyes swept over her in a questioning gaze. She gave him a little nod to let him know she was okay.

Taylor's eyes narrowed. "It's Ms. Vitanen. Sarah Vitanen."

A wave of dizziness washed over Annie, and she bit her lip and eyed Taylor closely. "You claim to be my sister, but do you have any proof?"

The chair screeched on the tile floor as Taylor pulled it out before she plopped onto it. "I should have expected you wouldn't welcome me with open arms. After all, you did nothing to help me."

Heat swept up Annie's neck and lodged in her cheeks. "What could an eight-year-old do to stop an adult? If you're really Sarah, what was the name of your favorite stuffed animal?"

"Cocoa," Taylor said without hesitation. "It was a brown kitten. I couldn't have a real one because Mom was allergic."

Annie's eyes widened. She caught her breath as she studied the other woman across the table. "Let me see your left knee."

Rebellion flashed in Taylor's blue eyes, and she leaned down to yank up her baggy jeans, then stood with her tanned knee exposed. A faded two-inch scar just below her kneecap matched the one in Annie's memory. Sarah had gotten snagged on a large metal hook under the dock at the marina. It had taken fifteen stitches to close the wound, and Annie had helped her sister hobble around for several weeks.

But was that proof? Kids had scars from all sorts of things. She *wanted* to believe her sister was still alive, but was Taylor really Sarah?

Her breath eased from her lips, and Annie couldn't speak for a long moment. "You really believe you're Sarah? Did you research all that and make sure the details matched?"

Taylor just stared back at her with that same defiance. In Annie's dreams, finding Sarah meant a tight embrace and happy tears, but Taylor's stance with her arms folded across her chest and her jutting chin warned Annie off any displays of affection. Not that she was feeling any warmth toward the other woman in this moment.

When the other woman plopped back in her chair and didn't answer, Annie licked her lips. "Why didn't you tell me when you first showed up looking for work? Why the fake name? I've been searching for my sister for years."

“Have you? Have you really?”

Annie glanced at Mason. “Ask him if you don’t believe me.”

Mason shifted his bulky form and nodded. “I’ve been helping Annie search. We’ve sent DNA samples in numerous times over the past ten years. Her parents searched for Sarah, and even hired investigators, until their deaths.”

Annie hadn’t known that. The Tremolo Marina and Cabin Resort operated on a shoestring, so they must have taken much needed money to try to find Sarah.

Annie shifted her gaze back to the woman across the table. Taylor twisted a strand of hair around her finger in a coil. Sarah used to do that too. If this was a scam, it was an elaborate one. With all her heart Annie wanted to believe it, but she couldn’t quite accept it. It was so sudden, and the circumstances were bizarre.

Mason cleared his throat. “We’ll need a little more proof. We can get the DNA back in a week or so.”

“I have nothing to hide,” the other woman said.

Annie had spent twenty-four years agonizing over her failure to save Sarah. The guilt had nearly swallowed her alive, though everyone told her she couldn’t have done anything. Until a few days ago, she hadn’t been able to recall much about that awful night. Maybe she hadn’t wanted to remember how she froze in fear when the kidnapper grabbed Sarah.

Annie fingered the scar on her neck where the attacker had wounded her with a knife. She’d been left for dead in the cold waters of Lake Superior, and while logically she knew she was no match for the gruff woman who’d snatched her sister, Annie had struggled to believe it.

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“Were any of the things you told me about your life true? Those things you said about your m-mother?”

“I had a rotten life, if that’s what you’re asking. All those things I said about my mother were true. And it was all your fault.”

There was nothing Annie could say to counter that when her own conscience condemned her too. She was only too glad when her boss, Kade Matthews, texted her with a new case. Mason could continue the questioning about the necklace.



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

**WITH ANNIE OUT OF THE ROOM, TAYLOR LEANED FORWARD,** tucking her head, and hugged herself. While Annie was around, Taylor knew her purpose and how to respond to anything, but on her own, she was a piece of driftwood tossed by the waves. Her hatred focused her.

Sheriff Kaleva shifted in his chair across the table from her. “You planted that necklace in the shed to frame Jon Dunstan, didn’t you, Ms. Moore?”

“I told you—it’s Ms. Vitanen.”

“We won’t know that until we get the DNA back, so let’s stick to what we know. The necklace?”

She flopped against the back of the chair and shrugged. “I told you I saw it there.”

“I don’t believe you. When you told me about it, you changed where you’d seen it. And you wouldn’t look me in the eyes. The necklace had no dust on it.” He leaned forward. “And you know what else it didn’t have? Anyone else’s fingerprints. Yours were the only ones on the stone.”

Her chest squeezed, and heat burned her cheeks. “You don’t know how Jon Dunstan treated me. It’s not right.”

“So he needed to pay for it by going to jail for something he didn’t do?”

When he put it that way, it seemed a little ridiculous. “Everyone gets away with stuff. Sometimes justice has to be served.”

“How’d you get the necklace?” He slid a can of soda across the table to her.

She popped the top and took a sip of lukewarm Pepsi. The sweet bubbles gave her courage. “I stole it. It was in Sean’s glove box along with a jumble of other jewelry. I didn’t think he’d miss it.”

“How do you know Sean Johnson?”

“He’s my cousin.” She shrugged. “Well, he’s Mother’s nephew. He didn’t tell you?”

“He’s deceased.”

The words hit her like a boulder. While he wasn’t her blood cousin, he was the closest thing to family she’d had left. And he’d been kind to her. This also meant the cops had no idea of what he did and why. Neither did she, for that matter.

She shifted on her chair. “I didn’t know it was important when I took it, but when I heard Annie describing the missing necklace, I knew it matched the one I had. I realized I could make Jon pay.”

“So you had the necklace before you saw the photo in the newspaper and realized it was tied to a murder?”

“I’ve had it since he came to help me with Mother’s estate. Such as it was.”

“Which was when?”

“December. She died on the second, and Sean came the next day.”

“What was your mother’s name?”

“Becky Johnson.”

“So she was Sean’s dad’s sister. Did you know Sean well?”

“I’d met him a few times while growing up. He came to our house maybe three times that I remember. He never stayed long.”

“Was there anyone else with him? Did he mention any friends he was close to?”

She shook her head. “He’s the one who told me—” She stared down at her hands. It was more than she should have revealed.

“Told you what?”

The sheriff didn’t believe her anyway. She raised her gaze to stare defiantly in his face. “That I was really Sarah Vitanen.”

“How did he know?”

“He saw a picture of me as a little girl, then showed me a picture of Annie and Sarah at about the same age. You couldn’t miss that I was that same girl.”

“How much do you remember about being kidnapped?” Mason’s voice was gentle.

Taylor’s throat tightened, and she swallowed past the stricture in order to speak. “I remember screaming for help. I remember *Annie*. When Mother took me, Annie just sat there staring.”

“You must not have seen Annie get knifed by Becky. She still has a nasty scar on her neck. It’s a miracle she survived. She lost a lot of blood and had to have several transfusions.”

Taylor gave a slight shake to her head. It was hard to know what to believe—her own memories or what she was told. Could she have missed Annie’s injury? In her memory, she was sitting with outstretched arms as Annie faded into the misty night, but that’s not the way it went down according to her sister.

But Annie would want to hide her neglect. No one would want to admit they’d let someone kidnap their baby sister. Annie couldn’t be trusted any more than the others in this town.

Mason uncapped his water bottle and took a swig. “Did Becky ever talk to you about your previous life?”

“I was punished if I ever asked about my sister or the cottage by the lake. Or if I asked for Cocoa, my stuffed kitty. I learned to be polite and well mannered. The few times I mentioned my previous life, she locked me in the closet.” Taylor clasped herself and rocked a little. “I don’t like the dark.”

“I’m sorry she wasn’t kind. Do you know why she abducted you?”

“I overheard Mother tell Uncle Clive that she needed a child, and once she told me she’d had three miscarriages. I suspect she took me after the last one.”

“She wasn’t married? You didn’t have a father?”

Taylor shifted the Pepsi can on the table. “Mother never even had men over. She must have given up trying to have a baby once she abducted me.”

Mason gave a slight whistle through his teeth. “So you came here after realizing this is where you used to live? You wanted revenge on Annie? Or did you hope she’d recognize you and welcome you back with open arms?”

“I took steps to make sure she didn’t recognize me.” She touched her fading red hair. “Hair dye and brown contacts. I wanted to find out more about her before I admitted who I was. And it was a good thing—she didn’t seem overjoyed to find out I’m Sarah.”

In spite of her anger, pain pierced her heart. It wasn’t a sin to want to be loved by her sister. But it clearly was not to be.

Mason rose. “I’m charging you for falsifying evidence. And I’ll be watching you. Don’t even think about hurting Annie or her little girl. If you give me information that leads to an accomplice



Sean might have had, I'll see about dropping the charges. Did you ever see anyone with him after you arrived? Or overheard any phone conversations? Did he have more than one phone he might have used to send texts?"

She wished she could do more than shrug and shake her head. Spending any time behind bars wasn't something she wanted to do.

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Thick foliage along the narrow fire trail in the Kitchigami Wilderness Preserve hid most of the cream-colored BMW. The same spruce and oak trees encroaching against the paint also nearly obstructed the path down the lane, and Annie doubted anyone had been down this trail since the car had nosed into the leaves. The pungent scent of pine swept down the hillside on the summer breeze.

Kade pulled back a heavy oak branch to reveal the back window. Orange tow warnings carpeted the glass. "The first one of these is from a year ago."

Annie peered closer. "Whisper Creek Condos issued the tow warnings. They wouldn't have towed it out into the wilderness. Who called it in?"

"A hiker thought it seemed suspicious."

"Is there any other info you've uncovered about Sean targeting Sophie Smith and Penelope Day as quarry? Do you think he could have had anything to do with this?"

The case had brought national attention, but Sean's death over the edge of the cliff hadn't allowed Mason to interrogate the man.

“Mason and I haven’t found any evidence that Sean was involved with any other deaths. We’ve gone through phone and computer records, but unless we discover another computer or a cache of evidence, we’re dead in the water.”

There had been several suspicious disappearances in the forest in the past year, but authorities hadn’t been able to discover what had happened to the campers. They could have fallen in the cold water and drowned or gotten lost and never made their way back out. Annie had hoped the discovery of Sean’s guilt in the deaths of the two teenagers would lead to more.

She started to run a finger through the thick dust coating the car, then thought better of it in case they needed to dust for prints. “I’m not a car person, but this has to be an expensive ride.”

Kade nodded. “At least sixty grand.” He forced his bulk through the foliage to examine the front. “No collision damage or anything. It’s strange.”

Annie peered through the dusty windows. She pulled on latex gloves. “I’m going to see if the car is unlocked.”

“Okay.”

With just the tips of her fingers, she tried the handle and the door popped open. “I’m in.”

She poked her head into the tan interior, which still held the aroma of new leather. In spite of the dust on the outside, she didn’t think the car had been used much. She opened the glove box and withdrew the registration. “Belongs to Michelle Fraser. Address is that new condo complex in Rock Harbor out on Whisper Road.”

“Pop the trunk,” Kade said.

She pressed the button and listened for the trunk release before she got out. Kade reached the trunk first, and she heard his quick intake of breath. “What?”

“A bloody sheet. Someone lost a lot of blood.”

She joined him and saw the crusty blackish-red mess on the sheet. It was the only item in the trunk. “Maybe not enough blood loss to be fatal. We need to see what we can find out about Michelle and how this car got out here.”

“I think we start talking to management at Whisper Creek Condos. And we can check out her residence. I’ll call Mason. If it’s foul play, this is his case.”

Annie always hated to give up a case, but Kade was careful to follow protocol, which was why he was the boss. She’d be likely to plow ahead with an investigation and circle back to Mason later.

Kade withdrew his phone and placed the call. “Got a situation here, Sheriff.”

Annie listened with one ear to Kade’s explanation. She walked around the car and inspected the ground to see if she could spot any footprints or other clues in the loose gravel and soft dirt, but it was hard to say how long the car had been parked here.

Taylor’s claims broke through Annie’s efforts to focus on the task at hand. Could her search for her sister really be over? And did Annie even want to believe it when the woman clearly blamed her for the circumstances of her life? But everything in Annie wanted to fully understand what had happened and what Sarah had gone through. Her doubts would be resolved in a week or so, but in the meantime, what could she do?

Bree had offered Taylor a place to stay until more was known about the situation. Annie’s first impulse had been to let her use the cabin where she’d been living, but she couldn’t risk Kylie’s safety. If Taylor/Sarah hated her enough, she might use Kylie as a weapon. And they still didn’t know how Taylor got that necklace she planted in the shed of the property Jon’s father owned. Had

she been involved with Sean? The questions meant she couldn't be trusted yet.

The hostility in the woman's eyes during the interrogation had been all too telling. While Annie held loving memories of her sister, Taylor felt nothing but rage and contempt.

Kade ended the call and walked over to join Annie by the hood of the car. "Mason is going to the condo at eight in the morning. He said if you wanted to join him, he wouldn't say no. He's shorthanded today. I need to get back to the office, so it's your baby."

"I'll meet him." She grimaced. "Honestly, I need something to occupy my head while I wait for the DNA test to come back."

He nodded. "I get it. Let me know what you find out."

She followed him to the SUV for the drive back to town, then shot Jon a quick text about meeting him for dinner later. His perspective on Taylor's claim would be interesting.

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# THREE

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## **JON DUNSTAN'S FACE HURT FROM SMILING AS HE DROVE**

back from Houghton. He'd sent his references and résumé last week to Houghton Orthopedics, and at their first meeting, he and Dr. Mike Willis had connected right away. Mike had called all the references and had spoken to patients and to other area doctors.

Jon found a spot in the gravel lot at Tremolo Marina and Cabin Resort and parked. The scent of a wood fire from the RV park burned his nose, and the dulcet tones of someone playing a guitar outside one of the cabins and the hum of motors out on Lake Superior added a relaxing backdrop on this beautiful June day.

He got out and headed for Annie's cottage. How should he tell her? Just blurt it out or wait for the appropriate time? Maybe telling her in front of Kylie wasn't a good idea. Her daughter had kept him at arm's length ever since they'd met.

He still found it hard to wrap his head around the fact she was *his* daughter.

It wouldn't be news Kylie would want to accept. Jon was trying with the girl, but it was hard when she couldn't stand him. He'd never been around kids much, and bonding with her wouldn't be easy.

The back door was open, and he saw Annie and Kylie through

the screen as he stepped onto the stoop. A large apron covered Annie's white shorts and navy top, and her blonde hair was up in a messy bun. The aroma of lasagna made his mouth water. He'd barely managed a bite or two of lunch before meeting with Mike, and he was ravenous.

He let his gaze linger on his daughter for a long moment. She was a replica of her beautiful mother, but maybe she had his hairline. Or was he being stupid to look for bits of himself in the little girl?

He rapped his knuckles on the wooden screen door. "Knock knock."

Annie turned toward him with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. She'd never been able to hide anything from him, and his elation dimmed. He suspected it had to do with her confrontation with Taylor. He'd shot her a text asking what had happened, but she'd put him off until tonight.

Her bad news might overshadow his good news. He'd bide his time and see what she needed from him.

"Come on in. You can butter the garlic bread. Kylie is crazy about the Sami's bread you got her."

Kylie lifted slim shoulders. "It's okay." She didn't glance his way as he entered the kitchen.

He exchanged a long look with Annie, who shrugged and handed him the loaf of bread, then gestured to the kitchen table where the butter dish sat. He washed his hands, then grabbed a knife from the drawer on his way and settled down to coat the bread for the broiler. Everything he needed was on the table, including garlic salt and a baking sheet.

The puppy scrambled over to greet him. "Hey, Milo," he said. The little guy was growing fast, and his curly tail swished

frantically when he pounced at Jon's shoe. He was a brown-and-black mirror of Samson with his mix of German shepherd and chow.

"Kylie, you can have your iPad until dinner," Annie said.

Kylie shot from her chair like an arrow released from a bow. "Thanks, Mom," she called over her shoulder as she went. Moments later, the music from *Pokémon Go* wafted behind her as she crossed through the kitchen to the yard.

At least she was out of earshot. Jon waited for Annie to spill what was bugging her before he gave her his news.

Annie's blue eyes studied him when he handed her the bread for the broiler. "You look happy."

"And you don't. What happened with Taylor? You didn't seem to want to talk about it."

She took the baking sheet and put it under the broiler, then set the timer. "Tell me your news first. I need some good news, and I can see it on your face. You got the job?"

"I anticipate an offer later in the week."

"That's wonderful!" She moved into an embrace and rested her cheek on his chest for a long moment. "I can't believe this is really happening."

He smoothed the stray wisps of blonde hair falling from her bun, then brushed his lips across her sweet-smelling hair. His love for her had never wavered in the nine years he'd been gone. It had just gone underground and erupted the moment he saw her face again. "Me neither. Now what's wrong?"

She lifted her head and moved back a step. "Taylor claims to be Sarah. And she knew things only Sarah would know. Mason took DNA, and we should know the truth in a week or so."

“I didn’t expect that shadow on your face. Aren’t you happy you might have answers after all this time?”

She stared up at him. The trepidation in her eyes deepened. “She hates me, Jon. She blames me for not saving her.”

“You were a child! That’s not fair.” His voice had risen, and he took his agitation down a notch. “What were you supposed to do?” He touched the scar on her neck. “The woman who took her nearly killed you. She knifed you and left you for dead. There was nothing you could have done.”

“I think Taylor had a terrible life with that woman. I want to make it up to her, but I don’t know how.”

He palmed her face in his hands. “It’s going to take time, love. You can’t expect to pick up where you left off. Do you really believe she is Sarah?”

She pressed her lips together before nodding. “It’s possible. If she isn’t Sarah, she somehow found out a lot about her. What would be the point? And she didn’t hesitate about getting a DNA test. Mason texted me after he interrogated her. Sean’s dad was her mother’s brother, and he was the only family she had. She says she found that necklace she planted in his car when he was helping her settle the estate.”

“Where is she now?”

“Probably in Bree and Kade’s guesthouse. Mason was going to turn her loose after finding out what she knew about that necklace. Kade wanted a chance to keep an eye on her.”

“Better not to have her around Kylie until you know for sure.”

The timer went off, and she backed away to get the bread out of the oven. “There are so many things I’ll have to explain to Kylie.”

“One thing at a time,” he said.



He was in no hurry to face his daughter's wrath when she found out Nate wasn't her birth father.

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The quiet cottage felt like a welcoming hug. Jon sat on the sofa with Annie beside him with the aroma of buttered popcorn hanging in the room. Only a few handfuls of their snack were left in the bowl. Tonight they decided to embark on a *Matrix* marathon, but he couldn't keep his mind on the movie. Not with his life about to take a dramatic change.

There were no guarantees with this life change. Questions about the future remained unanswered. He knew he loved Annie, but was it enough to overcome the obstacles? Kylie might never accept him. If she didn't, he couldn't see Annie putting their happiness ahead of her daughter's.

No, *their* daughter. It was a reality he still struggled to accept. He'd missed out on her first tooth, her first step. She called someone else *dada*. It would take the right timing to broach the subject with her. He hoped Annie had a better idea of how to break the news than he did.

Annie scooped up a handful of popcorn. "You're quiet tonight."

"Just thinking about Kylie. When do you think we should tell her?"

She scooted away a few inches. "Not yet. I can't deal with that right now when I'm waiting to hear if Taylor is really Sarah."

He could accept that. After searching for Sarah for so many years, this had to be all-consuming. He wanted it to work out, but he had his doubts about Taylor. She'd tried to frame him—all

because she was jealous he was in love with Annie. He'd tried to let Taylor down easy, but he'd only succeeded in angering her.

His face must have radiated his skepticism because Annie stared at him. "What? You don't think Taylor is Sarah?"

The pain in her eyes told him how much she hoped he was wrong. "I have no way of knowing that, but Taylor hasn't been exactly truthful. She tried to implicate me in the murders, and for all we know, she participated in Sean's plot. Others probably know about the stuffed animal and Sarah's scar. Neighbors, friends of your parents. Sarah was part of the fabric of life here for five years. I'll bet you still have that stuffed kitten, right?"

Annie nodded. "Kylie has it now. She loves Cocoa too, but it's getting a little ratty looking after all these years."

"So even her friends would have heard the name. And Kylie might have told her where she got the plushy and how it got its name."

"That's true." She sighed and looked down at the popcorn bowl. "At least the DNA will tell us the truth."

"And what if she *is* Sarah? You welcome her into your life in spite of the character flaws we've already witnessed? You let her still have access to Kylie? I'm sure there are other things we still don't know about her. While it's a terrible thing she was stolen at such a young age, that experience would've shaped her."

Tears leaked from the corners of Annie's eyes, and he felt like a heel for causing her pain. But he didn't trust Taylor not to hurt Annie and Kylie. Even if the DNA matched, Sarah wasn't the same little girl who was taken away. Annie would open her heart and life to the other woman, and that scared him.

He pushed away his feelings of guilt. "She came here resorting to subterfuge. That's never a good thing."

“Maybe she wanted to get to know us before she told us the truth.”

“And maybe she had a more sinister motive.”

Annie’s nod was reluctant. “She admitted she blames me for what went wrong in her life.”

“Maybe she wanted revenge. She could harm Kylie.”

“She could’ve done that already if that was her intention.”

“Unless she’s biding her time. I don’t want you to trust her, Annie. Can you at least be on your guard?”

She didn’t meet his gaze. “If Taylor’s really Sarah, I have a lot to make up for. Half the resort would belong to her too.”

“So give it to her and move into another place. The marina is a drain on your resources and your life. Without it, you could concentrate on the job you love and on Kylie. You only try to keep it afloat because of your parents.”

She shrugged. “There’s an element of truth to that. There are so many times I’ve wished I could close it and forget it. But if I gave it to Taylor, she wouldn’t know the ins and outs of running the place. I’d have to help her. I don’t think it would be that easy to sign it over and move on.”

Jon could see how this was going to play out. Annie’s life would be totally entwined with Taylor’s. “What if she’s not Sarah?”

“Then I need to find out why she came here and who fed her information. But I just don’t know, Jon. She twisted her hair around her finger the same way. And that scar. She would’ve had to have inflicted it on purpose to have one just like Sarah’s. It’s an old scar too, Jon. That injury didn’t happen last month. Or even last year.”

He saw the hope and fear twisting her insides. What good

could come from this with Taylor's animosity? He moved closer and embraced Annie. Her shoulders stiffened a moment before she relaxed against his chest.

"I'm so scared," she whispered. "Be patient with me."

"Always," he murmured against her hair. "I'm not leaving you or letting go, Annie. We'll figure this out. I won't let her hurt you."

Taylor had a bad motive for coming here on the sly. She'd already proven she couldn't be trusted. They had the deck stacked against them in so many ways, but this new wrinkle might be even worse than the situation with Kylie. And that wouldn't be a fun thing to try to straighten out.



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*